

## The assessment of Mevlana Exchange Program: The case of Morocco

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### Abstract

Mevlana Exchange Program is a program that helps to exchange students and academics between the Turkish universities and foreign higher education institutes in Turkey and other countries. The aim of this study is to determine the views and recommendations of exchange students Adiyaman University, who went to Morocco within the scope of Mevlana Exchange Program. This study has been designed to be a case study which is patterned on a basis of qualitative research. Within the research, the opinions of the participants were gathered with a 'structured interview form' which was developed by the researcher through taking expert's opinion. The research is limited with the pieces of information that were provided by the students who went to Morocco. The vast majority of students who have gone to the country in question have expressed that they were not satisfied with the services, such as health, alimentation, sheltering and security and experienced huge problems.

**Keywords:** Adiyaman University, higher education, Mevlana Exchange Programme.

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## 1. Introduction

Mevlana Exchange Programme aims at the exchange of students or faculty members between domestic and foreign educational institutions. The peculiarity of this programme is that it encompasses all the high educational institutions in the world. Participants are able to be the part of the programme for one semester in an academic year. Students must take 30 European Credit Transfer System credits for one semester and 60 for the whole academic year. Students registered associate degree, bachelor's degree or doctorate programmes are able to participate in the exchange programme.

Students can benefit from the programme for a maximum of 2 years and faculty members of a period between 14 and 90 days. Faculty members who hold the lecturer position can participate in the programme but research assistants cannot. The amount of the scholarship given to the students varies according to the economic standards of the host country. In case of truancy without an excuse, the scholarship would be cut off. These students cannot attend Mevlana Exchange Programme in the subsequent period. But, the one whose excuse is considered to be appropriate is able to benefit from the education mobility in the subsequent period. Within the Turkish high education system, the aims of Mevlana Exchange Programme is determined as follows:

1. To render Turkey a centre of attraction within the field of education,
2. To increase the academic capacity and competence of the high educational institutions,
3. To contribute to the globalisation process within the high education,
4. To share the rich historical and cultural heritage of Turkey at a global scale,
5. To ensure the improvement of the culture of respect and sympathy for the differences through interaction among cultures (YOK, 2015).

Apart from the social aims of the Mevlana Exchange Programme, there are also individual gains that are acquired by the students that will participate in the programme. The students who participate in the programme are able to acquire individual gains, such as familiarisation with the culture of the destination country, acquisition of a social circle, learning a foreign language, as well as the academic development. The Erasmus experience becomes more intense if the foreign residence is prolonged after graduation or if cross-national partnership or marriage takes place (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Cammelli, 2001; Jallade, Gordon & Lebeau, 1996; Maiworm & Teichler, 1997; Pichon, Comte & Poulard, 2002).

As for the faculty members who will participate in the programme, they are able to acquire experiences, such as giving a lecture in a foreign country, attending a conference, project or seminary on an international level. Also, all these exchanges bring the tendency of generalisation of higher-education, providing it with continuity and performing it in a democratic environment (Saatcioglu, 1999).

When the literature is reviewed, it is seen that the only study regarding the student and education mobility is Guzel (2014) of which topic is 'The contribution of Mevlana Exchange Programme to the socio-cultural development of the bachelor's degree students'. But one has not encountered with any research which involves a general assessment of the Mevlana Exchange Programme. The present research was conducted in order to fill this gap. The main aim of the research is to determine the opinions and recommendations of the students participated in the exchange programme from a Turkish University Adiyaman regarding the services that were provided for them in the host university (in Morocco). Depending upon this main aim, researcher have sought answers for the following questions:

1. What are the opinions of the students regarding the following services that have been provided for them by the host university?
  - Health
  - Alimentation/Food
  - Sheltering/Dormitory
  - Security
  - Education
2. What are their opinions regarding the personal benefit/gain which they have acquired from Mevlana Exchange Programme?
3. What are the recommendations of the students who participated in Mevlana Exchange Programme?

## 2. Methodology

Since this study aims to survey with a holistic approach the opinions and the recommendations of the students regarding Mevlana Exchange Programme who have gone abroad through the programme, it has been designed to be a case study which is patterned on a basis of qualitative research. In a qualitative research the event, individual or the object that are in the scope of the study are identified conditions (Karasar, 2010). 'In general, in a case study more than one data gathering methods are utilised; in this way, one tries to attain a variety of data mutually confirming each other' (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011).

The study group of the research consists of students who studied in Adiyaman University, Faculty of Education, Department of Arabic Language and Literature between 2015 and 2017, and went to 'Hasan II' and 'Sultan Slimane' Universities in Morocco as a part of Mevlana Exchange Programme. And, two students which are included in the population of the research went to the Pakistan (Sindh University) and Sudan (Al Neelain University), respectively, between 2015 and 2017.

As a result of the fact that the students that went to these countries are low in number, they have not been included in the research. The research is limited with the pieces of information that were provided by the students who went to Morocco. Four of the participants were female, six of them were male. The reason for the fact that the research was carried out with the students who study in the Department of Arabic Language Teaching is that it is the only programme that has joined Mevlana Exchange Programme. Other departments of Adiyaman University have not joined Mevlana Exchange Programme yet.

Within the research, the opinions of the participants were gathered with a 'structured interview form' which was developed by the researcher through taking expert's opinion. The main aim of interviewing method is gathering the information and documents from its very source. The method of interviewing provides the researcher with sound, systematic and comparative information (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011). The researcher has tried to ensure the 'validity of scope' of the interview taking an expert's opinion. For this purpose, in the preparation process of the interview form, the researcher often appealed to the opinions of the faculty members and the expert and took their recommendations.

To ensure the functionality of the interview form, interviews and applications were carried out with the three students who were not included in the study group. In accordance with the preliminary application and the expert's opinion, the articles which were not sound were discarded and the articles which were not clear were revisioned. In the interview form, there are 21 questions in total which determine the opinions and recommendations of the participants regarding Mevlana Exchange Programme. Such research questions provide the possibility for the researchers to handle the fact which they want to survey with a flexible and open-ended approach (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011).

The answers given by the participants to the questions in the interview form were taken through an audio recorder. The researcher has tried to ensure the validity and reliability of the data through having the participants confirm the transcript of the audio recordings.

Descriptive analysis technique was used for the examination of the data which were gathered in the research. Descriptive analysis is used in the cases in which the conceptual and theoretical basis of the research is clear. It consists of the stages of forming a frame, processing the data, defining and interpreting the findings (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011).

Within the data analysis process, transcribed opinions of the participants were transferred into the computer medium and separated into sub-groups. For the reliability analysis, 'Reliability = (Consensus / Consensus + Disagreement) × 100' formula developed by Miles & Huberman (1994) was used. In the study, reconciliation/reliability at a rate of 92% was ensured. In the qualitative research, 90% and above rates of reconciliation signify reliability on the desired level (Saban, 2009). In order to signify each of the participants, coding as 'K1, K2, K3,...' were used.

### 3. Results

The opinions of the students who participated in the research were gathered under seven sub-themes considering their opinions on 'health (1), alimentation (2), sheltering (3), security (4), education and (5) services', 'the gain they have acquired (6)', and 'their recommendations for other students who want to benefit from the programme (7)'.

The opinions of some students who went abroad for education through Mevlana Exchange Programme regarding the quality of the health services which were provided for them by the host university are as follows: 'There was no health service in the university I went to; I stayed in hospital for three days because of my chronic kidney disease and paid twice or thrice as much as the normal hospital charge' (K5). 'My friend got sick. Since the ambulance was a paid service. We went to the hospital on our own. They sent back my friend after injection. Although it was a public hospital, they took so much money' (K8). 'There was no health service in the university we went to. We met all the expense on our own' (K1). 'There was no such thing as hygiene in the country. Bees and insects were flying over the trays in the cafes we went. Bugs came out from the pasta packages which we bought' (K2). 'There was no soap at the sinks; the hygienically conditions were bad' (K10).

When the opinions of the participants regarding the alimentation/food services of the host university, it was seen that almost all students indicated that there were no alimentation services in the university they went to, so they tried to buy this service on their own. 'There was no food service in the school' (K2). 'We met our food and beverage needs from nearby restaurants or at home by ourselves' (K9). 'No food services were provided for us in the university. We took it in turns to prepare the meal at home' (K1). 'I did not encounter any alimentation service in the university. In general, I preferred to eat at the restaurants near the university while I was there' (K7).

Regarding the sheltering services, students mostly have expressed negative opinions: 'I had so many problems in the country we went to, and mostly in the sheltering issue. In the first days after my arrival, I consulted the relevant institutions if we can benefit from any dormitory facility or not. After I took a negative response, we found a house and started to live there' (K7). 'There was no dormitory, we rent a house. House rent was paid by the university for the first 5 months, thereafter we paid for it' (K1). 'There was no dormitory in the city. There were left for us no choice but to rent a house. We were swindled a number of times while renting a house. Over the period in which I was there, we had to change our residence four times' (K5). 'When we arrived there, at first we stayed in a hotel. Then we had to rent a house, for there was no dormitory in our region. There were people who tried to swindle us' (K2). 'Since the house rents were high in the region where our university was found, we resided in another city' (K6). 'Regarding the sheltering issue, no one helped us. We found a hotel on our own, and then we had to rent a house since the hotel is not hygienic and secure. They took much money from us since we were foreigners' (K8).

All the students who have taken advantage of the programme indicated that the quality of the security service provided by the host university was low: 'To be honest, over the education period, it is impossible for me to say that we lived in comfort and security' (K2). 'In the city we went to, there was no security at all. When we first arrived, the mobile phone of one of our friends was stolen in a vehicle. We thought to go to the police. But people said that even if we would go to the police we would not be able to attain anything and that it was better to forget that phone' (K9). 'There was a huge security problem. While we were returning to the home, we were being disturbed. We were chased by cars. They tried to enter our house. We were afraid of going outside' (K5). 'One day, while I was sitting on the seaside, the coast guard forced me to give my phone number' (K4). 'We stayed three girls in a house. Someone whistled before our window around three thirty at night, all of us got scared. After less than five minutes our door started to be forced. When we shouted they went away' (K8). 'We tried to overcome the security problems in the city through moving as a group' (K1). 'The place where we were full of purse-snatchers and beggars. The mobile phone of one of our friends was stolen when our car stopped before the traffic lights' (K2).

Almost all of the students who participated in the research indicated that they were satisfied with the way in which the educational services were presented and the interest of the teachers there: 'Teachers of the university in which we studied gave lectures on our level, and they were interested in us in every issue. They were sincere and good people' (K9). 'Regarding the issue of education, they were seriously interested in us they gave us private lectures. They asked us to continue the courses one more semester. They gave presents to us' (K2). 'Our coordinator assigned three postgraduates to take care of us. We received private tuition from those students every day in certain ours. In the examinations, they prepared different questions for us. They held examinations that are appropriate for our level' (K1). 'They appointed postgraduates for us, we received tuition from them' (K3). 'The faculty members there took care of us personally; they helped us in the issues that we did not understand' (K10).

The vast majority of the students who participated in the research indicated that they acquired great gains from Mevlana Exchange Programme: 'In general, I was rather an unconfident person. Thanks to this programme I have learned to face my fears. I have noticed that a foreign language is learned through speaking rather than through lectures. I believe that getting acquainted with different cultures, different people, eating different foods and traveling to different places have opened up my horizon' (K1). 'After Mevlana Exchange Programme my self-confidence has improved. Since I have lived for months in a country which I have not known at all, I have gained experiences through struggling with the difficulties' (K5). 'Before then I supposed that the lives in the other countries are like our lives altogether. I saw that this was not the case. My view of life has changed. I learned that everyone does not live in the same conditions, and there are people living in very difficult conditions' (K2). 'This programme gave me the opportunity to look differently to the life. It has been a great opportunity for me to learn to stand on my own legs. And above all, I have seen what dimension possesses the language which I want to learn in its own culture. I have made new friends. I have set sail to new horizons' (K7). 'I have learned to keep up in spite of the problems that I faced in a country which I did not know its people, culture, even language. I have also learned to find solutions for the problems, to look my country from outside, and not to be anxious or shy before new acquaintances' (K6). 'Acquaintance with a different country, different people and different cultures, has changed my view of life. Abroad, I have learned that Turkey is such a beautiful and special country' (K8). 'I have learned a new culture. I have acquired different life experiences. Maybe I have been worn down psychologically for I have encountered with unhealthy life conditions but I believe that my metabolism has got stronger. I have started to make plans about going to different countries as I have learned about different cultures. I believe that making observations about Turkey from abroad has provided me with positive thoughts' (K3). A parallelism is observed between these expressions and Guzel's (2014) conclusion that 'Mevlana Exchange Programme contributes to the socio-cultural development of the participants'.

The some of the participants indicated that Mevlana Exchange Programme has provided great benefits for them in terms of language improvement: 'I can speak Arabic more easily now. When I listen to songs or watch television, I can translate them more easily now. Thanks to this programme I have had the opportunity to make speaking practice' (K5). 'I have had the opportunity to speak Arabic and to see a different country' (K9). 'My language practice has been improved' (K3). A parallelism is observed between these expressions and the following common conclusion of Messer and Wolter (2005) and Gokcek (2013) which they reached in their different studies: 'Among the reasons of the students for participating in the Mevlana Exchange Programme, the desire for improving the foreign language comes first'.

Also, the students who have participated in the research indicated their recommendations for other students who will go abroad through Mevlana Exchange Programme as follows: 'They had better convert their money to dollar before they go abroad, for banks take so much commission for drawing money. I also recommend that they bring spending money with them, and protect their mobile phone from being stolen' (K1). 'I recommend that the ones who will attend the programme do not lose time there for seeking the stuff which is present in our country. This can result with disappointment. They should approach people with some tolerance, and not forget that they are different from us in all respects. There are differences between the countries in every aspect such as culture or food' (K2). 'I recommend ones who will go there to put aside all their prejudices. They should know that they will absolutely encounter some problems either big or little. When the issues such as food, sheltering, security, language etc. are considered, they should not trust anybody fully' (K3). 'If they want to learn the language they should stay with locals as much as possible' (K4). 'Definitely, they should take out private insurance and think their health first. They should find someone who will meet and direct them there. It would be better for them if they can arrange a place beforehand' (K5). 'Certainly, they should go only after taking everything into consideration. They may fail the course, not be supported by their own university, or not encounter with an education which meets their expectations. Despite all this, they should go to a foreign country whatsoever. Certainly, there would be so much thing that they would gain' (K10). 'The first recommendation that I would like to make for the students who will attend this programme is that they should arrange a place before they go, and until this process is finalised they should not depart from Turkey' (K6). 'They should not eat every food and believe everyone. Unless it is so necessary they should not go out alone. They should not use mobile phone outdoors. They should wear their bags diagonally otherwise it can be stolen' (K8).

#### **4. Discussion, conclusion and suggestions**

Mevlana Exchange Programme is a programme that ensures the exchange of students and academics between the Turkish universities and foreign higher educational institutes. The aim of this study is to determine the views and recommendations of the exchange students from a Turkish university regarding Mevlana Exchange Programme, who went to Morocco within the scope of the programme. Appealing to the opinions of the exchange students regarding the services that are provided in the foreign universities is quite important for the exchange process to operate healthily.

The opinions of the students who participated in the research were gathered under seven sub-themes. These subthemes concern their opinions regarding 'alimentation', 'health', 'sheltering', 'security', 'education services', 'the gain they have acquired' and 'their recommendations for other students who want to benefit from the programme', respectively.

The students participated in the research generally stated that the services that were provided for them by the host university were of poor quality. These results contradict with the findings like 'Erasmus students have been satisfied mostly with the security and hygiene' of the previous studies that have been carried out by Unal (2011) and Yagci, Ekinci, Burgaz, Kelecioğlu & Ergene (2007). This contradiction can be attributed to the fact that Erasmus student mobility is rather carried out with the universities in the developed countries, and the Erasmus process has been gradually matured.

Almost all the students have stated that there was no health and alimentation service in the universities in which they studied. Participants stated that they met their food needs from the nearby restaurants, or on their own at home which they rent by themselves as well. It has been concluded that although the sheltering needs of the students who participate in the exchange programme should be met by the university in which they study, they are met by students themselves through renting a house.

In the research, more than half of the students asserted that the security and sheltering services of the host university were rather bad. Participants also indicated that they experienced security problems at home (especially at night) or on street, and they were forced to give their mobile phones or phone numbers. Almost all of the students who participated in the research stated that although the quality of the education given in the host university was not on the desired level, they appreciated the interest and the approach of the faculty members. The students stated that the faculty members treated them well and helped them in solving their problems.

Participants stated that postgraduate students were charged by the faculty members for the solution of their problems, additional programmes intended for language teaching were opened for them, and affirmative action was implemented for them in the examinations. A parallelism is seen between these opinions and the finding of the research which was conducted by Boyaci (2011) that 'The faculty members of the universities in which the Erasmus students study are interested in them and help them in solving their problems'. There are similarities between these results and the finding of the research that was carried out by Kondrateva, Sabirova & Plotnikova (2018) which indicate that 'the process of the development of intercultural potential can get their real value under the condition when teachers cultivate student's understanding of the true meaning of education, gravitating to universal values of the individual'.

As for the dimension of personal gains obtained from Mevlana Exchange Programme, almost all the students highlighted that the exchange programme helped them to get acquainted with different cultures. And, some of the students participated in the research stated that they have benefited from the cultural dimension of the programme rather than the education.

Mevlana Exchange Programme, on the one hand, aims at ensuring quality in high education and collaboration between the universities; on the other hand, it provides the students with the opportunities in terms of personal gains. When the opinions regarding the personal benefits provided by Mevlana Exchange Programme are viewed, it is seen that while some of the students stated that the programme helped them in empathising with other people and societies, another group of students indicated that the programme has improved their self-confidence. A parallelism is seen between these opinions and the finding of the research which was conducted by Kolesnikov, Nikulina, Danilenko, & Zimovets (2019) 'the students returning to their homeland, it turns out that they to establish interpersonal relationships, to communicate effectively with local residents'. There are similarities between these results and the finding of the research that was carried out by Sahin (2007) and Sancak (2009) which indicate that 'Students who participate in Erasmus programme acquire personal gains as a result of encounter and acquaintance with different cultures'.

Almost all the participants recommended that students participate in the programme despite all the negativities experienced. Participants recommended the students who want to go abroad with Mevlana Exchange Programme discuss with the students who have benefited from the programme before, arrange an accommodation and find somebody who will meet them there before they go, be very careful against theft and other security problems, and become friends with local students in order to improve their language skills. In the light of the results attained in the research the following recommendations were made:

1. The vast majority of students who have gone to the country in question have expressed that they were not satisfied with the services like health, alimentation, sheltering and security and

- experienced huge problems. For the solution of these problems, improving the collaboration between the universities is recommended.
2. In case of the continuation of the problem, it is recommended that the partnerships with the present universities are reviewed and new agreements with the universities that have strong infrastructure are made.
  3. The research is limited with the opinions of the students of one Turkish university. It is recommended that similar researches are made for other universities and the results are compared.
  4. Also, it is recommended that similar research is made within the context of the opinions of the faculty members who go abroad through Mevlana Exchange Programme and the results are compared.

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